

Chapter 8 – Behavior Problems

Behavior Problems

This is the number one reason dogs lose their homes. Well-intentioned but busy people fail to socialize their puppies. Men love to wrestle and play tug-of-war with their young Airedale. Couples treat their Airedale like their baby until the real thing comes along. Unsupervised children are allowed to tease and annoy the family dog. Ignorant and frustrated people take their anger out on the dog.

Airedales come into rescue with a wide range of problems. Some problems reported on the intake interview fail to materialize when you are actually “hands on” with the dog. Many "problems" are simply the owner's failure to understand the breed. Our job is to observe the behavior and decide on a plan of action to correct any problems. You don't have to be a behavior expert to be successful at rescue.

There is a wide range of printed material available on dog behavior. Most areas have behavior experts willing to help with rescue dogs. Your peers in rescue have dealt with many of these problems before. They can help you put together a plan of action. You DO have to be honest with prospective homes about the behaviors you have observed. Many rescue homes enjoy taking on a challenge. They derive personal satisfaction from helping a dog who no one else wants. You need to evaluate the prospective home. Do they possess the skills and are they motivated to help the dog overcome behavior problems? Following are some of the typical behaviors we have successfully dealt with.

NOTE: Many behaviorists believe when a dog is re-homed, old behaviors are interrupted. The dog's routine has become so totally disrupted, YOU have the opportunity to retrain and correct old problem behaviors. This "window of opportunity" exists for about two weeks when the dog again establishes routines and becomes comfortable with his new surroundings. Many rescue folks agree. At the two-week mark, homeless Airedales begin to act more mischievous and more secure. If your adoptive home is lenient and unwilling to correct problems during this initial time, they have lost their "window of opportunity."

Obedience Training

You CAN teach an old dog new tricks. Every rescue dog will benefit from obedience training. Encourage adopters to make time for this activity. Obedience will help form the dog/owner bond. It will make the dog really belong to the new owner. Most important, it will help the rescue dog gain self-confidence and help them to look at their new owner as "the boss." The small investment in time will be amply rewarded. Encourage adopters to enroll in group obedience classes.

Group obedience classes will also help the rescue dog socialize with other dogs, and head-off potential dog aggression problems down the road. The owner should interview trainers and be careful to choose a trainer who uses positive reinforcement methods. We know from experience that a heavy hand is fatal with Airedales. It creates fear aggression that sometimes can't be overcome. The potential trainer should also enjoy terriers, and Airedales in particular. Those who don't will not provide a good experience for dog and owner.

Fear

Some dogs develop a fear response to children, men in hats, women, etc. Usually this is a result of mistreatment. It may take more time in screening to find the right home but these dogs can be successfully placed where they won't be subjected to whatever sets them off. Some exhibit fear response to objects held in your hands like a flyswatter, magazine, newspapers, broom, etc. This type of fear response will improve over time but may never disappear altogether. The fearful dog will benefit greatly from obedience training with his new permanent home.

Thunderstorms and Fear of Noise

Many dogs experience mild anxiety at fireworks or thunderstorms. A few dogs have extreme fear reactions resulting in major adjustments on the part of the dog owner.

Phifer came from the inner city of Detroit. He was shot in the leg during a home robbery and left alone for days before his owner discovered him. He was dumped at the Humane Society still bleeding with the bullet lodged in his leg. Phifer associated all loud noises with being shot. He became violent in his attempt to find safety. He had exploding diarrhea and ran away from home during thunderstorms. He jumped through a glass door wall. His adoptive home eventually discovered cuddling him in bed, his head buried under a pillow helped.

Jenkins lived outside before coming into rescue. He became so sensitized to thunderstorms he began to react several hours before they hit. On rainy days, he refused to relieve himself outside. No crate could hold him. He ripped a leather recliner down to the bare frame. In his frenzy during storms, he began to bite at anything including his owners. He failed six adoptive homes. He was a normal dog during the winter months. Every summer, he lost his home. Several different medication regimens failed. The vet said he would go into liver failure if we didn't take him off the daily tranquilizers. He was adopted by an SOAR officer as the only alternative to euthanizing him. Jenkins fear has been reduced because he finally has a secure home. He takes only natural calming supplements during storms.

Depending on the degree of fear and the individual dog, a combination of several approaches can be used. Behaviorists agree cuddling and sympathizing often make matters worse. They reinforce the dog's perception that there IS something to be afraid of.

- Desensitization tapes can be played at increasing volumes to acclimate the dog to the noise. This is a long-term therapy that must be done slowly to prevent fear reaction.
- During the storm/fireworks, leave the lights on (both inside and outside) to mask light flashes outside.
- Turn the television/stereo up to mask the noise.
- Get busy! Be cheerful, play games, give treats during storms. If you become anxious anticipating the storm, your dog will pick up on YOUR anxiety!
- Give your dog refuge in his crate. Cover the crate with a light blanket. If the dog doesn't settle down, this isn't the solution for this particular dog.
- Ask your vet for short-term tranquilizers (valium, acepromazine are typically used.) Try the "natural" homeopathic herbal remedies for calming and stress.

Fireworks

Airedales do not like fireworks. Some may tolerate them better than others but the display does not bring joy to dogs. Every year Airedales along with many other animals experience fear and confusion during Independence Day celebrations. A dog's sense of hearing is very acute. If a bang is loud to our human ears, imagine what it must sound and feel like to them. Below are some suggestions to help ensure that your Airedales get through the fireworks display safely.

- Keep your Airedales inside when it is likely there will be fireworks. Every year we hear about dogs that were outside during the display who run away – often it seems into traffic. Keeping your pet safely contained at home can prevent this. If your dog has a crate or other cozy space for a den, consider putting them in this area.
- Stay with your dog during the fireworks. Your presence will help to calm your dog and while the noise may still frighten them, they will feel better with you there.
- It sounds obvious, but try to keep the windows and curtains closed during the fireworks as this will lessen the effect of the noise and bright flashes.

- Turn up the television or radio. Normal household noises can help to distract from the loud noises coming from outside.
- When it is necessary to take your dog outside for a walk, use a leash. Consider a leash in a fenced area as well. Stay outside with your dog. They may become so frightened that they jump a fence that they have never considered jumping before. You also never know when a hot ember will land in your yard. A curious Airedale might just try to eat it.
- Make sure your Airedale has current identification on his/her collar. This is especially important if you are traveling over the holiday. Even dogs that have previously shown no fear of fireworks can occasionally take flight at the loud noises and flashes in the sky.

Separation Anxiety

This is a common problem made worse by the dog losing its home. The shelter experience and coming into rescue exacerbates a dog's insecurity. Every time this dog changes hands, his problem becomes worse. He seizes on every person like a lifeline. He accompanies you into the bathroom. He becomes Velcro dog. When his adoptive home takes him, they stay home from work for a few days to be with him. They never leave his side. When the Monday dawns, they go to work and leave him uncrated. They come home to a disaster. They lock him in the laundry room or the basement the next day. They return home to a hole chewed in the door. The moldings are ruined. The following day they crate the dog. Returning home, they find he has destroyed a new crate. Blood is everywhere! The dog has broken a toe and cracked his teeth from escaping the crate. They give up and the dog is bounced once again. His anxiety problem has gone from mild to major through mishandling. When you observe the anxious, insecure dog you must act to prevent separation anxiety.

When the anxious dog is placed, the new owners must leave him every day from the first day. He should be crated from the beginning. All comings and goings from the home should occur quietly. The owners should not make a big fuss. Ignore the dog both before leaving and when getting home. No baby talk. Withhold affection around coming and going time. Be very matter of fact. The dog should NEVER be punished for deeds done while the owner was away. This will only increase the dog's anxiety. Medications can be very effective in helping ease separation anxiety when used for the short term. They should be weaned off (tapered down) over a period of weeks or months. Medications are a supplement to behavior retraining, not a solution. "*The Dog Who Loved Too Much*" by Dr. Nicholas Dodman, is an excellent resource book for separation anxiety.

A Solution for High-Energy Airedales

These people contacted us thinking they would have to surrender their dog. A little later, they wrote to us to tell us about this solution. It is something you can pass on to your adopters who might be in the same position.

We bought Heidi on Halloween day. At the time my oldest child was two and my youngest was 7 months. Heidi was timid and quiet and I had my doubts that this dog would last in a bustling family with little children. What a rude awakening for our family when Heidi came out of her shell two weeks later. After two years of relentless failed training methods, a destroyed house and a dog that was more often called "Gaul -dangit" than Heidi, we called Airedale rescue.

We were put in contact with one of your people. She sympathized with our situation and sent us information on the rescue program. Although the program seemed to help so many dogs and families, we just couldn't do it. Like it or not, Heidi was part of the family. Had Heidi not gotten along well with our now three children, the situation might have been different. But as it was, our children loved Heidi, and she loved them. She played army fort with Warren, 5 years, and allowed Nadine, 3 years to dress her up for tea parties. She cleans off Ethan 1 year every time he has cookies. So - what were we to do? We tried everything imaginable -- or so we thought.

Doggie Day Care was a new concept for us. None of our children had been in daycare, so to use this for a dog seemed absurd. But it was our miracle answer. Heidi goes to Waggin day care a few times a week - usually only on Mondays and Fridays. She never spends more than 8 hours there, and is never in a kennel. I'm sure not all programs are as wonderful, just as not all children daycares are, but I only wish we would have found this years ago. I can only imagine all the headaches and doggie time outs it would have saved us. Heidi enjoys running with a wide mix of other dogs, playing in the pond, and even her schooling! She now is truly a member of our family, not a burden to it. Where before we could not even let her near the front door of our home for fear she would run off, she now gladly greets visitors and sits still just long enough for a petting. She is no longer chewing everything in site, or leaving dirty piles in the house. She is a brand new dog!

I attribute some of our success to her age - 3 is a whole year older than 2 and her pure exhaustion after playing at "school." But mostly I think that it cured her boredom. We have a fairly large fenced in back yard, but we didn't have the time to spend hours playing with her. She had all the fun toys imaginable, but like a child, they only entertain for a short time. I am writing this story of our success in the hopes that this could be another option you might suggest.

Our family would like to extend the warmest appreciation for rescue -- for even though you could not offer any advice, you were there and understood our dilemma. It was wonderful to know that we were not alone with our Airedale problems, and I hope anyone ever in a deciding moment like ours would also give their pet another chance.

Behaviorists and Trainers

If you need to locate a behaviorist or trainer in your area to help you out with a rescue dog, consider going to the Association of Pet Dog Trainers at www.apdt.com. Go to "search for a trainer" and put in your area. Each listing comes with some information about the trainer and their credentials. Talk to some of these people on the phone. Ask for references. Try them some time. We feel that it would be valuable for every coordinator to make some contacts in their immediate area as some of our good trainers we already use may not be convenient or available.

Searching for Fun

Karen Clouston is an Airedale rescue volunteer in Canada who also has search and rescue dogs. She likes to teach her foster dogs how to do basic searching to learn how to search for her scent. This is a fun sort of thing to do with your dog and it gives them something to learn. You can find out more about this at <http://rcmpdog.tgx.com/games.htm>.

Crates

An important tool in training, transportation, and living with any dog can be a crate. SOAR has a wonderful brochure available that outlines the use and abuse of crates. Many who won't use crates have never been educated about their proper use. Depending on the situation, a child gate may be an alternative to the use of a crate. If the owner flatly refuses to use a crate or child gate, this may be someone who won't place limits on their dog's behavior and it may be setting the dog up for failure

This can be dangerous to any dog's long term chance for a home with this person. Elderly or arthritic dogs should be gated if confinement is necessary. They need to stand up and turn around more frequently than a crate will easily allow.

Aggression

If we know that a new Airedale may have some aggressive tendencies prior to coming into rescue, they will be placed with one of our professional trainers for evaluation. If an Airedale not represented as aggressive is found to be aggressive after they are in our possession, they will be placed with one of our trainers for evaluation.

Evaluations will consist of a written report presented to our committee of a minimum of four volunteers charged with determining whether the dog can be safely placed or should be humanely euthanized.